

WITH RISING DEMAND for diversified class offerings, an increase in state and federal testing requirements and a growing student population, the science of constructing a school day has become akin to building a house of cards on a moving train. When the entire house of cards is finally assembled, the natural inclination is to avoid even breathing, lest the entire structure come crashing down. So, what's the builder's reaction when someone—perhaps a well-meaning fellow passenger—wanders by and suggests switching the placement of two cards in the teetering construction? If it were you, likely you would pay little attention to such a suggestion, fearing the need to rebuild the entire house from scratch—because even seemingly unrelated cards are dependent upon each other.

Likewise, school administrators who piece together educational mandates, requirements in teacher's contracts and numerous other “cards” required to create the schedule for the school day are often understandably skeptical when approached about changing that schedule.

But a growing number of school foodservice operators are making the case that much can be gained by switching the position of two key components (and student favorites) in the elementary

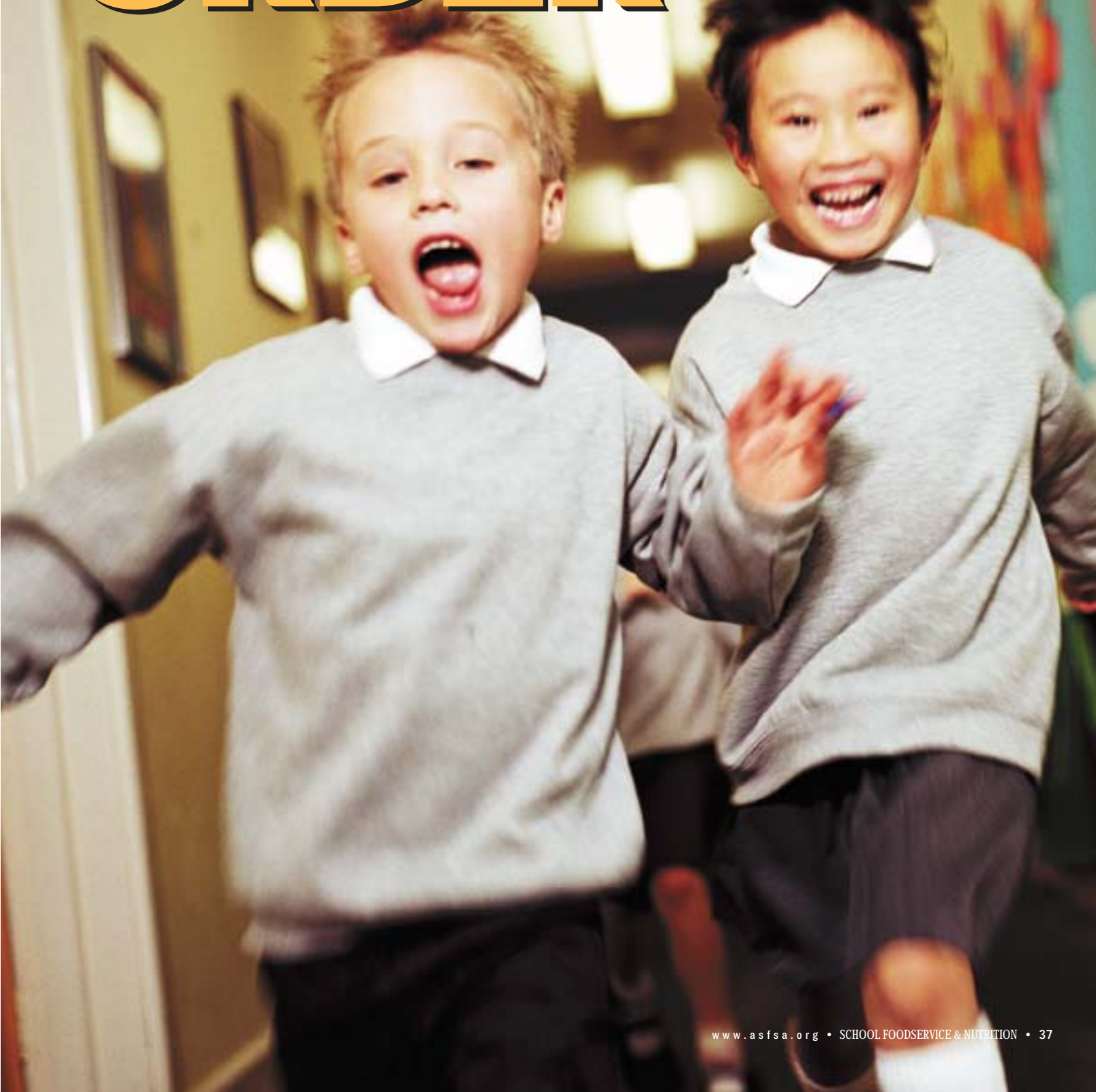
School administrators and child nutrition professionals reap benefits from swapping lunch and recess schedules.

school day: lunch and recess. And a number of administrators are keeping an open mind to the idea. The traditional—almost sacrosanct—ordering of lunch before recess *is* being swapped, sometimes carefully and intentionally, and other times on a “let's try it and see” basis.

Why are child nutrition professionals interested in taking on this cause? And why have a surprising number been successful in convincing their elementary schools to schedule recess before lunch (RBL)? A mix of scientific data supports this position, and practical logistical benefits plus teacher backing for the concept also are helping to sell the idea to school administrators. Of course, each school is certain to develop its own list of pros and cons when contemplating this issue, and not all those that experiment with such an arrangement will stick with it, for a variety of reasons, such as practical problems and administration changes. But it seems that those who have made a commitment to RBL are prepared to tout its numerous benefits, including a decrease in behavior problems, increases in student appetite and improvements in classroom performance.

REVERSE ORDER

By Patrick White





Why not?

Outsiders might not see any obvious impediments to a simple swap of time slots. But looking deeper does reveal a few potential challenges associated with RBL. As a practical matter, bringing students into the lunch area immediately after recess raises a few problems. Consider the lack of enthusiasm of one school foodservice professional in Iowa, who has firsthand experience with RBL scheduling: "Our lunchroom is small and crowded. Imagine the smell in there when all the kids—about 85—were hot and sweaty. Also, it seemed like the kids didn't eat as much because they were tired."

A more common concern expressed by school foodservice operators—as well as by teachers and administrators—is the logistical challenge of getting students coming in from the playground to wash their hands prior to eating. Constance Mueller, RD, SFNS, director of foodservice for Bloomington (Ill.) Public Schools, convinced one elementary school in her district to try RBL scheduling, only to encounter the handwashing dilemma. After a one-year trial, the school decided to return to the more traditional schedule until a solution for efficient handwashing is implemented. "Schools need to lead the way in reminding people the importance of handwashing—and we had some parents who brought this point up," Mueller explains. "When you bring 30 students in from recess, you can't send them all to the restrooms at once. And we didn't have

handwashing sinks in the cafeteria," although she notes that the school is considering adding these.

Of course, even in traditional lunch-before-recess scheduling, Mueller says that student handwashing is performed "willy-nilly," with many, but not all, classrooms featuring handwashing facilities. And when students—frequently dirty after play—come from recess directly to the cafeteria, that hit-or-miss success rate breaks down even more. "It's almost not even an issue of the time constraint," notes Mueller. "You just don't have the supervisory capacity to monitor all of the kids in the restroom."

Trying something new

Despite barriers like efficient handwashing, Mueller remains supportive of RBL, which she first read about in a research paper by Mary Jane Getlinger, et al., published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (September 1996). The article inspired her to approach each of the elementary school principals (who, under the district's site-based management structure, had the final say on scheduling decisions) to see if any would be interested in pilot-testing this approach in their respective schools.

One principal, characterized by Mueller as having a reputation for a willingness to try new things, gave the project the green light. The principal sold the school's teachers on the idea, and after the trial year, the teachers were active

proponents of the new schedule. "We had really positive feedback from teachers, who said that when kids came back into the classroom *following recess*, much of the first half-hour was spent acting as a referee for 'fusses' that had started outside on the playground," Mueller reports, adding, "But when students came back to the classroom *after lunch*, they were calmer."

The Bloomington director goes on to recount that the child nutrition staff at the trial school observed students eating and drinking more during lunch as a result of already having played outside. "A lot of times, when recess is scheduled after lunch, the kids rush to get outside, and they don't spend very much time eating," she explains.

With such good reports, Mueller is eager to solve the handwashing dilemma and resume RBL scheduling. She currently is weighing the option of purchasing a portable handwashing sink and pilot-testing this unit directly in the cafeteria so that students can use it as they enter the lunch line. However, she points to high cost and a limited water capacity as drawbacks of such systems. As an alternative, she has experimented with purchasing and distributing disposable "handy-wipes" but remains concerned that this is not a comparable alternative to effective handwashing. "I think there's a lot to be said for the concept," Mueller concludes, adding, "It's just a matter of working out the details."

Take the Initiative

Regardless of whether your school schedules recess before lunch, or the more traditional lunch before recess, there is a growing link between these two important parts of the school day. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), during the 1990s, the percentage of students participating in a daily physical education class dropped from an already low 42 percent to a dismal 29 percent. What's more, Dr. Julie Magri of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned elementary school principals in the January/February 2003 issue of *Principal*, NAESP's official publication, that 30 percent of elementary schools don't have a regularly scheduled recess period.

The elimination of both required and optional physical activity surely contribute to the recent rise in childhood obesity. It's a frustrating setback, particularly in light of the efforts school nutrition programs have taken to improve the nutrition and lower the fat content of meals served to students.

One way child nutrition professionals can take the initiative to promote a turnaround in school policy related to physical activity is to call attention to the link between good nutrition and exercise in raising healthy students. If you work in a school with no recess periods, push your school administrators to consider adding one, in conjunction with school lunch. There doesn't need to be an official link between the two activities, but discussing the virtues of each together can help make the argument that a nutritious school lunch and an opportunity for students to exercise can make the midday hours the healthiest part of the school day. You won't need to convince the students: Recess and lunch have long been *their* two favorite parts of the school day.

Waste not, want not

Getlinger's 1996 research (similar to an earlier study by Read and Mooseburner, published in a 1985 *School Food Service Research Review*) focused on the reduction of food waste in RBL environments. The researchers found that overall food waste decreased from 34.9 percent to 24.3 percent, and they credited this to students feeling less rushed through the meal. With more traditional scheduling, the study noted, "Students exert strong influences on each other to be ready to participate in playground activities."

In addition, the research highlighted the common complaint that "taking recess after lunch often causes stomach discomfort and dizziness, which may contribute to higher food waste." In both of these situations, RBL scheduling helped to solve the problem, allowing students to finish their meals because they're not hurrying to get outside.

Not only does RBL appear to influence decreases in food waste, but schools that have tested this approach also report students demonstrate better behavior, both in the cafeteria and when returning to the classroom—perhaps once again owing to the fact that students don't feel rushed during their meal. One

National Food Service Management Institute study on a related topic found that "students need approximately 10 minutes just to consume their lunch," and that the remainder of the lunch period is filled with serving and socializing. The researchers asserted, "Socializing is an important aspect of [school] dining because allowing students sufficient time to relate to others provides a break in routine and refreshes them for afternoon classes." Flipping the order of lunch and recess may allow for more relaxed play, less panic to complete lunch prior to socializing and a smoother transition back to the classroom.

Real-life experience seems to back up these research-based assertions. Angela Haney, director of student nutrition services at Central Consolidated School District #22 in Shiprock, N.M., has one school in her district using RBL—with impressive results. "One of our elementary schools switched to recess before lunch because the school nurse pushed it through with the principal. The teachers say that the kids are calmer and are ready to get to work immediately instead of needing a cool-down time," Haney reports. "The kitchen manager and custodians have noticed less food is going through the trash," she adds. As for the handwashing issue, Haney reports that the school nurse used her own budget to purchase instant hand sanitizer. "The kids line up to use the sanitizer and then go on into the lunch line. So far it is working very well," she says.

Everything old is new again

With traditional school schedules so ingrained in our culture, RBL may seem like fairly innovative idea, but the concept definitely is not a new one. As early as 1978, *School Food Service Journal* published an article profiling an RBL experiment at La Tercera Elementary School in Petaluma, Calif. The article noted that students and parents had "expressed approval for the system," though no mention is made of operational challenges, such as those involving handwashing.

Nor is the RBL approach a new concept to school administrators. Also in 1978, an article published in the *American School Board Journal* describes RBL as "a neat little way to improve lunchtime discipline." In this piece, the practice of scheduling recess before lunch is credited with glowing reviews: "Pupils eat more slowly because they're in no rush to get outdoors to capture a spot on the noon-hour ball team. Lunch hours and kids are quieter because of the more relaxed classroom environment. Rowdy cafeteria lines have become only a bad memory. Instead of the odious duty of patrolling a noisy cafeteria, teachers now use the lunch hour to talk about nutrition, instruct students in table manners or simply read a story. And...the amount of food that's thrown away has fallen dramatically in schools that have switched to this program."

In short, RBL might seem to be one of the few good ideas to come out of that most forgettable of decades. Still, the article bemoans the fact that "ingenious as the [RBL] idea may be, it has caught on in only a few schools—probably because boards and administrators often are so tied up with curricular and managerial issues that they lack the time to worry about the languishing lunchroom."

Such administrative worries have only grown since the 1970s, a

relative "Leave it to Beaver" era compared to the challenges of the 21st century! But the promise of RBL remains, and its time seems to be coming around once again.

RBL today

Perhaps the most comprehensive initiative to promote, institute, assist with and monitor RBL scheduling is taking place today in Montana. According to Montana Team Nutrition Program member Molly Stenberg, RD, LN, "We have been working with four schools in Montana to pilot a recess before lunch policy." Stenberg reports that the results to date have been very encouraging. "The atmosphere in the lunchroom is more conducive to eating and is much more relaxed, as the kids are not rushing to get outside. The kids are amazingly quiet and calm in the lunchroom. They are actually eating," Stenberg says.

Further, she reports that there has been a positive reaction among the teachers and principals in the schools participating in the RBL pilot. "The teachers feel that the kids are more settled and ready to start classes, and principals see less behavioral problems on the playground, in the halls and in the lunchroom," Stenberg remarks.

Finally, from a dietitian's perspective, Stenberg asserts, "Scheduling recess before lunch makes nutrition sense!" For one thing, the RBL pilot schools have seen a decrease in unopened milk containers—a sign students may be increasing consumption of valuable calcium and protein. The bottom line, according to Stenberg, is to "allow students to play, which is *their* priority, and then allow them to enjoy a nutritious lunch in a relaxed environment, which is *our* priority. Good nutrition goes hand-in-hand with improved behavior and learning. RBL gives students the opportunity to excel in both."

Candy Johnson, principal at Lower Grade Hellgate Elementary in Missoula, one of the schools in the Montana pilot, agrees with Stenberg's assessment. She heard about RBL at a development workshop and decided to give it a try. "It's working great," Johnson reports. "The kids take more time to eat and we have less discipline problems on the playground."

At the Rau School in Sidney, Mont., Supervising Teacher Carolyn Koch also decided to participate in the RBL program. Her motivation was to reduce noise in the cafeteria. While she hasn't seen a positive response to *that* hypothesis, she's seen other benefits. "I think [the students] are eating better. And the kids like [the schedule swap], as they don't feel sick when playing on the tire swing now," says Koch. "Although the noise level hasn't been reduced, we will keep the policy. The teachers like it as they can get more stuff done before going to lunch...and the students seem

Advice for Administrators

The principals involved in Montana's recess-before-lunch (RBL) pilot program offer fellow administrators the following pointers for getting started with RBL. Pass them along to decision-makers in *your* district!

- 1 Meet with all of the staff involved (teachers, janitors, aides, food-service personnel) to work out the kinks. Continue to adjust the schedule as needed.
- 2 Spend as much time as you can in the lunchroom, especially the first couple of weeks, to practice this new routine with the kids.
- 3 Take care to collect lunch money *prior* to recess.
- 4 Be committed to stick with the program, even through a trial period. Expect some resistance.
- 5 Kids likely will be hungrier with this change in schedule. Consider offering a mid-morning nutrition break.
- 6 Educate the community to help build support for the RBL program.

to make better use of the time in class before [the break], because they want to get to recess."

Administrators in the Montana pilot program have found that RBL is effective with slightly older students, as well. At Whitefish Central School, Principal Kim Anderson instituted the scheduling change at her school of 680 5th-, 6th-, 7th- and 8th-graders. "The benefits that we have seen include less conflict on the playground and in the lunchroom; improved behavior in afternoon classes; and students eating better and wasting less food," says Anderson.

Beware resistance to change

"Expect a small amount of resistance at first, but be willing to make a commitment to the recess-before-lunch change and ride it through," advises Anderson. The key is to look for solutions to potential barriers, such as the handwashing dilemma. For example, in Montana, some of the RBL pilot schools bring students from recess back to the classroom, where they drop off their coats and wash their hands before heading to the cafeteria.

Given the benefits being reported by researchers, school foodservice professionals, teachers and administrators, RBL may be a trend that's likely to continue and grow. And it ties into the issue of adequate time to eat, which is also gaining increased attention. For example, a recent bill in Connecticut would require all districts in the state to provide a minimum 20-minute lunch break and, for children in Grades K-5, a minimum of 20 minutes each school day for physical activity.

And at Kettle Moraine Schools in Wisconsin, Foodservice Director Sharon Boos is preparing to switch to RBL at one of her schools for the coming school year. She's confident it will be successful: "So far I have convinced one principal to try it. He is all for it and cannot come up with one reason not to try it. I think once he tries it, it won't be long before the others follow."

SF&N

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READER SOURCE

From jungle gyms to basketball courts, playground equipment can vary from region to region and even school to school. What are the top playground trends that keep kids moving during recess (before or after lunch)? Find out more at www.asfsa.org/readersource.

asfsa.org



MOVE
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*Our community working together to increase healthful eating and physical activity
Coordinated by the Missoula City-County Health Department*

For Immediate Release

January 21, 2003

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**Less Waste in 2003
At Local Elementary Schools**

It used to be that Missoula elementary students ate lunch before recess, often eating as fast as they could and tossing much of their lunches in the trash in order to race out to the playground. Now, at Paxson Elementary and many other elementary schools, students are on the playground before coming inside to eat lunch. With 25 minutes allocated just to lunch, students are eating more complete meals and wasting less before heading back into the classroom.

Local: Waste at Paxson was **reduced from 10-12 full trash cans after lunch to only 3-5 full cans.**

“The only regret I have is that we didn’t figure it out about 20 years ago,” says Joe Stauduhar, Principal of Paxson Elementary School. Principal Stauduhar goes on to say, “There have been far more positives than negatives.” Positives include enhanced supervision because of the lower numbers of children on the playground at any one time, less grade crossover, less waiting in lines, improved behavior in the cafeteria, and less food waste.

State & Nation: Similar results are seen at other schools in Montana and around the nation where recess before lunch policies are implemented. Highlighted improvements consistently include:

- Improved food intake & less food waste
- Increased milk consumption
- Improved behavior in the cafeterias and classrooms.

Montana’s Team Nutrition Program with the Office of Public Instruction offers materials and assistance for schools interested in making the lunch/recess switch. Contact Molly Stenberg, Project Coordinator, 406-994-5641.

MOVE Project: Recess before lunch is one strategy to bolster healthful eating, one of the goals of Missoula’s *MOVE* project. **Complete nutrition is related to overall health and improved test scores at schools.** *MOVE*, funded by a CDC obesity prevention grant distributed through Montana’s DPHHS, aims to increase healthful eating and physical activity in families of school-age children. Throughout the year *MOVE* will highlight activities that support these goals. The combined efforts of our community may reduce the continuing increase in overweight, which has nearly doubled in children in the last twenty years.



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Nutritionists say scheduling recess before lunch is best for students, schools

10/1/03 Contact: Molly Stenberg (406) 994-5641

D,W, All local, Tribal On INN look for: Recess B4 lunch Keywords: Recess, MSU Nutrition Department
Photos to accompany this story can be downloaded at: <http://www.montana.edu/commserv/csnews/nwarchive.php>

Editor's note: Recess Before Lunch makes a good local feature. Look at the list at the end of the story to see if a school in your area is involved.

For the sake of better student appetites and attention spans, more than two-dozen Montana elementary schools are revamping an elementary school tradition that is as well established as apples for the teacher and schoolhouse bells.

The schools are involved with the successful Recess Before Lunch policy that swaps the traditional order of lunch followed by recess. Montana Team Nutrition, a program overseen by the Office of Public Instruction, School Nutrition Programs is based at Montana State University in Bozeman. Nutritionists from Montana Team Nutrition say studies prove that students play, eat and study better if recess precedes lunch, instead of the other way around.

"Recess Before Lunch is a small change that nets huge rewards in children's behavior," said Molly Stenberg, a registered dietitian with the Montana Team Nutrition Program at MSU. Team Nutrition is working with the Office of Public Instruction to urge elementary schools statewide to implement the program. Stenberg said the program makes nutritional sense because students are hungrier and eat better if they play before they eat.

"Teachers feel that kids are more settled and ready to start afternoon classes if they have recess before lunch. The atmosphere in the lunchroom is more relaxed if students are not rushing through lunch to get outside."

That is the experience of Kim DeBruycker, principal of Gallatin Gateway School, who instituted Recess Before Lunch at her school a year ago for first through fourth grades. Finances were a key reason that DeBruycker made the change. She wanted to reduce expenses for playground aides. Whatever the initial reason, the switch to Recess Before Lunch for younger students has had a positive impact on the behavior of the entire school, DeBruycker said. "We really like it."

"When the younger kids go to recess before lunch, students solve many social problems that might have come up before they come back to class and don't bring arguments into the classroom. And, they don't take 10 minutes of class time to become settled after lunch. They get right to their work."

DeBruycker said she chose the younger students for the Recess Before Lunch policy because older students are better able to wait to get out on the playground and they also understand the importance of a good lunch. And even though she had to buy another oven to make the program work, the program has been economical for Gallatin Gateway.

"The students eat better and there's a lot less waste," DeBruycker said. Indeed, on one recent day

when scalloped potatoes were on the menu, there was little waste and many of the children went back for seconds.

Stenberg said the Recess Before Lunch policy was initiated in several pilot sites – including – Lewistown, Conrad and Whitefish– and the concept seems to be spreading by word of mouth.

“It usually takes schools a little effort to make the switch to Recess Before Lunch,” Stenberg said. “We’ve found it’s well worth the effort.”

Montana schools that have implemented Recess Before Lunch include:

Belgrade: Ridge View Elementary School (grades 2 and 4)

Belt: Belt Public Schools.

Billings: Central Heights School.

Bonner: Potomac Elementary.

Conrad: Meadowlark School (grades K-2).

East Helena: Radley Elementary School (grades 3-5).

Frenchtown: Frenchtown School (grades 7-8).

Gallatin Gateway: Gallatin Gateway Elementary (grades K-3).

Great Falls: Mountain View School.

Havre: Highland Park Early Primary (grades K-1); Lincoln McKinley Primary (grade 2); Sunnyside Intermediate (grades 4-5).

Helena: Helena Middle School (grades 6-8), CR Anderson Middle School (grade 6), Broadwater Elementary, Central Elementary, Bryant Elementary, Keesler Elementary, Four Georgians (grade 5 only).

Lewistown: Highland Park School (grades K-2).

Melstone: Melstone Public Schools (grades K-6).

Missoula: Hawthorne School (grades K-5); Lewis and Clark School; Paxson School; Russell School; Hellgate Elementary (grades K-2).

Seeley Lake: Seeley Lake Elementary.

Sidney: Rau Elementary School.

Valier: Valier School.

Whitefish: Whitefish Central School (grades 5-8).

Captions:

1. Students at Gallatin Gateway School who participate in Recess Before Lunch say they enjoy having time to take a swing on the playground before they eat. Photo by Stephen Hunts, MSU News Service.
2. Gallatin Gateway School students say they like having recess before lunch. Gateway principal Kim DeBruycker says the arrangement makes sense financially and students also are more attentive than they were with the more established routine of lunch before recess, Photo by Stephen Hunts, MSU News Service.

